

Little One by PlaidDino

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Summary: AU. In 1993, the peaceful Hawkins finds itself suddenly thrown into new dangers following the disappearance of a young boy, while Mike, Dustin, and Will find a very strange young child with extraordinary powers, and try their best to look after her, which isn't as easy as they may have expected... Featuring the adult versions of our four boys being awkward helicopter moms.

Little One

Author's Note: This is something of an introduction, so this may be a little different from what I have planned ahead for future chapters, and it's different from anything else I have done so far, but I'm hoping that this different is a good different!

Also, while I hadn't originally planned for three of our favorite boys to be working with radio, I ended up getting a little inspired by the podcast King Falls A.M., and... well, this is what turned out! I hope you enjoy!

Hawkins, Indiana.

1993.

Things had definitely changed in the past ten years for the seemingly middle-of-nowhere, boring town that people had once known. To begin with, the development of an enormous shopping mall and a highway only began the sudden flow of more and more business and expansion. It wasn't just a small town anymore. It also helped that Hawkins had become something of a military town. People who lived in Hawkins back in the 80's were only vaguely aware of the laboratory that was tucked away, but when a whole military encampment settled around Hawkins National Laboratory, it became a hot topic for years. The place was locked *tight* with military defense, and soon enough, families of men working there were moving in. The old citizens began to wonder: What was going on in that lab?

But they weren't complaining. Life was made exponentially better when it came to getting jobs right in the area. That was why, even ten years later, lifetime residents Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, Will Byers, and Lucas Sinclair, had found their niche right in the place they had known all their lives, even though they had never expected to.

Lucas Sinclair had found his way working for the military base right in town, and was currently dating Max Mayfield. Mike Wheeler was a technical engineer that decided to start working for a small radio

station right in town, and, since Dustin and Will had been looking for work, he ended up producing a late-night talk show in which they were the hosts. It was a dream for the three, ever since they got that Heathkit Hamshack in 7th grade. They talked about news and weather (something that Mike had promised with the original premise of the show, which is why they kept at it), but their favorite part about it, and the part that Dustin and Will emphasized the most, was talking about their most favorite things: Science, the paranormal and extraterrestrial, and pop culture. Dustin liked to call this journalism, even when they were forming conspiracy theories based around the X-Files.

Many still held questions about the secretive Hawkins National Laboratory and its surrounding military, but it eventually became another thing that was simply pushed to the back of everyone's mind by 1993. The lab just... was. Nobody talked about it, and nothing from the lab ever affected them.

At least, until one night on Mike, Dustin, and Will's talk show, everything seemed to start at that point to derail from there. Not that they hadn't already been speculating on deeper, more mysterious things going on in town. In fact, on that very night, that is exactly what they had been doing.

Dustin and Will had decided right away to begin their show with discussion instead of their usual introduction of telling the local news, because Will had a doozy of a story to tell.

"Welcome to 11.7 on your radio dial, that's right, it's Hawkins' very own "The Hawk", and tonight," Dustin paused to laugh with excitement, "My co-host Byers has one *hell* of a story to share with us tonight!"

" - Will Byers." Will corrected, "For any new listeners out there."

"Yeah." Dustin agreed, "This is *the* show to be listening to tonight, because RIGHT NOW, my main man Byers has a story - "

Will piped up in song, " - The story of how my life got flipped - turned upside down!"

And then Dustin joined in to sing the next part, creating a duet of "And I'd like to take a minute, just sit right there, I'll tell you how I - "

Suddenly, Dustin dropped out of song and deadpanned directly into the microphone, " - EXPERIENCED AN ACTUAL HAUNTING.", making Mike cringe in the background as he listened to the show through headphones. He swiftly attempted to lower the microphone's volume, but he needed to turn it right back up shortly after. Mike grunted quietly.

"I did." Will confirmed solemnly, but the two other men in the station with him could easily see that he was practically brimming with excitement.

"So, if you are faint of heart, turn to another station right now. And kids, if you find yourself possibly in the presence of an apparition, don't be like my buddy Will, here. We are very well-versed in how to handle paranormal activity - we're practically professionals." Dustin gloated, receiving a disbelieving glance and a slow head shake from Mike.

"It's really not that bad." Will comforted an invisible scared person through his microphone. "It was a friendly ghost, I think."

Dustin snorted loudly.

"It didn't feel malevolent, is what I'm saying." Will shot back to his co-host.

"So, on a scale from Casper to The Poltergeist...?" Dustin prompted curiously, still not having heard the entirety of Will's story. He specifically had wanted to save it for the show to get his own raw response to the whole ordeal.

Will frowned in thought, trying to decide what would best describe the experience he had felt. He had been scared, that was for sure. Everything that happened seemed to lend itself to a ghost. But... he hadn't felt the presence of *anything*, like many people experiencing hauntings have reported. It was more like... well, he didn't really know. He shook his head, deciding he would figure it out as he was telling their listeners about it. "I don't know." He admitted, "Maybe

our listeners can help us figure that out."

"No offense, but I'm pretty sure I would do a better job at figuring it out." Dustin gloated playfully.

"Yeah, right." Will retorted, rolling his eyes. "Anyway... So, yesterday, after we ended our show, right?"

"Right." Dustin replied eagerly, hanging on every word already.

Mike looked up curiously. He had heard most of the details earlier, but he still wondered if Will would recall more details. He had taken personal interest in the matter, since it involved his sound equipment that he would owe an awfully large sum of money to replace if anything had broken. Thankfully, he only needed to replace some lights.

"So, Dustin here had already left for the night, and our producer Mike was turning everything off, right? Well, I told him I would lock up after he got everything powered down for the night, especially after he had spent the whole afternoon figuring out the problem with the lights down at Channel 13's TV station. He fixed that, by the way, in case any of you listeners didn't know." Will narrated on. Mike's face flushed at the mention of his work. "So Mike left, and I was just going to leave the recording room when the lights just went crazy. I mean, like Channel 13 crazy, except worse. I was starting to think that there must be something going on with the power around town, since we've been hearing several reports about light issues around town, and this was just one of them. But then, either one of the phone lines answered itself, or something had forced itself through, but sound started coming from it."

By this point, Will's eyes were going wide at just recalling the events in detail as he looked to one of their phone lines, vaguely frightened, but absolutely fascinated. Dustin and Mike followed their friend's line of eyesight, and onto the line in question. Dustin's eyes lit up with interest.

"It was nothing but static at first..." Will continued, his eyes turning distant as he almost felt as though he was stepping through his memories and walking through it all over again, seeing and hearing

the same unnerving events, drinking in every detail that reminded him so much of the movies he loved. "And then I heard a voice. It was weird and echoing, almost like it was coming from underwater, or something. But the voice was loud and clear..."

Suddenly, Dustin and Mike were startled by an unexpected change in Will's voice, before they realized he was putting his acting experience from high school to use. His voice was pitched higher, and it was shaky and quiet.

"Papa? Papa...?!"

The two others exchanged an awed glance. The voice he gave was so perfectly child-like and creepy, they grinned at the sensation of hair standing up on their arms. Will definitely was a talented actor.

Will switched back to his normal voice. "I don't know why, but I really felt like I needed to answer the phone. So, I walked over..." He paused for dramatic effect, getting into his storytelling, "...And I picked it up. I said, 'Hello? This is Will Byers from 11.7, The Hawk.'"

Dustin snorted. Only Will would be able to give such an average response to a possibly demonic child voice coming in through their phone.

Will switched back to his child voice. "...Will Byers?"

"That's right." Normal Will replied, "You called the radio station... Are... Are you trying to call your dad?"

Will paused for a moment before returning to his narration. "...I only heard whimpering. I was so focused at the time, but... The lights were blinking faster and faster. Until I heard the voice *scream bloody murder*. I'm not gonna lie, I dropped the phone. And the lights were getting brighter, and brighter, then POW!" He exclaimed, "The overhead lights just *blew out* completely. I couldn't see. But nobody was on the other end of the phone line anymore, the dial tone was going. I was out of there after that."

There was a long pause, as Will looked to his co-host, whose mouth was currently agape. Dustin slowly leaned toward his own

microphone, and he concluded, "You heard it, folks. What rank would I give it? Hm, on my scale, I would give it a solid five. Maybe a six. That had to be a poltergeist, affecting the physical world like that. I dare any of you to try and tell me otherwise." He was practically bubbling over with excitement.

Will laughed a little. "I mean, like I said, maybe it was the power messing up, and some kid calling the wrong number. I don't know."

Dustin scoffed. "Um, I doubt it. The lights and the phone call seem *way too* connected. Plus, how was the dial tone going if the power went out?"

Will shrugged good-naturedly, but he definitely seemed to be agreeing with Dustin slightly. "Well, we want to hear from our listeners now. Do you think we have a real ghost on our hands, or was it just a creepy coincidence? And, have you had any similar experiences, whether with lights or mysterious phone calls? Give us a call right now at 277-681-2501."

It was pretty uncommon for them to get that many callers, especially within the first fifteen minutes, but all three of the men were shocked to find one of their phones lighting up almost immediately. Their jaws dropped. Will and Dustin exchanged excited glances, and Will gestured for him to answer it. Dustin gestured back, for *Will* to answer. Will pointed to the phone line emphatically.

As Dustin gave in and reached to press down on the button to answer, Will spoke into his microphone: "Alright, we have a caller, ladies and gentlemen! Line number one!"

Dustin answered the line. "This is Dustin Henderson and Will Byers with 11.7 'The Hawk'." He couldn't help but grin. Nobody had ever called this early.

Everyone's excitement immediately dropped from a 9 to a 2.5 the moment they heard the voice answer. Will blanched.

"Hi, Dustin. Hi... Will."

Dustin's jaw dropped incredulously. "*Jennifer Hayes?*"

"It's... Hodges. Jennifer Hodges, Dustin." Jennifer corrected politely.

Will took in a small involuntary gasp, the first breath he had taken since he had initially heard her voice. "Jenn, I didn't- Um, I didn't know you were back in town." He said.

Dustin and Mike looked to their friend with some concern, not sure if they should take control of the conversation or not. They were not happy at all to hear from this particular woman after their junior year of high school. In fact, Dustin was tempted to hang up right then and there, on 'accident'.

"I have been for a few months..." Jennifer replied shakily, sounding almost as uncomfortable as Will, but not quite to his level. "Me and my son."

Dustin squinted. "What about *Mr. Hodges*?" He asked, a little harshly.

Will's eyes widened and he emphatically shook his head to Dustin. Dustin ignored him, even though his own guilt at the rude question was starting to ebb at him.

Jennifer sighed. "Look, I really don't feel comfortable talking about that." She said, her voice tinged with irritation - and yet, even more than that - anxiety.

Dustin scowled. He was feeling a rise in adrenaline out of his own defensiveness for Will, and for the party as a whole. "Yeah, I understand." He said quickly, then he dove straight into the question demanding to be answered in his mind: "So that begs the question. If you don't mind me asking, why the - " Mike slapped the beeper just in time - " - are you calling us?"

"The story. Um, Will's story." Jennifer replied, still politely, but definitely irritated now. "Because, I believe you had just told us to call if we had similar experiences, or... whatever."

"Oh, is your past coming to haunt you?" Dustin joked.

"Look, can you please be serious?" Jennifer asked after an exasperated sigh.

"I'm *very* serious. I was just curious, because, you know, the last time all of us had a conversation, you told us never to speak to you again."

"*I know*, Dustin. Can we talk about that later?"

Dustin had managed to calm down to some degree due to the straight up *fear* in Jennifer's voice. And, well... They did want to talk to people about potential encounters with the paranormal, so he had to shut up if he wanted to see if she had one to tell. Even if it was coming from Jennifer Hayes, traitor to the party. He proceeded to say in a lower tone; "Then I ask my question again: Why did you call?"

At this point, Mike and Will were casting looks of disbelief at Dustin. They knew what had happened, and how hurtful the loss of her friendship had been - especially on Will - and they were all definitely confused and uncomfortable that *she* of all people just dialed up and called their radio station, and a little defensive at that, but... Well, Dustin was definitely going overboard about it. Will was beginning to mutter: "Dustin, you don't have to - "

"Because I think your story has something to do with my son!" Jennifer snapped suddenly, immediately drawing the attention of all three.

Dustin, Will, and even Mike paused, mildly confused, but definitely curious. They exchanged a look between each other. Will swallowed. "Okay. Sorry, Mrs. Hodges," He said, rather uncomfortably, but his curiosity was beating that by a long-shot, "Please, elaborate."

There was silence on her end for a moment before she breathed out shakily. "My son has been missing for two days. The police have been looking all over for him, and..."

" - The missing kid is your son?" Will asked suddenly, surprised. Now that he thought about it, the boy's last name...

"Yes... My boy, Josh. I'm gonna be honest with you, things haven't been easy on us after the move, I... I've been working two jobs. He was supposed to wait for me to pick him up from school, but... I don't know, he doesn't like to be there. Sometimes he just walks home by himself, worrying me sick. But he... Two days ago, I came to pick him

up, and he wasn't there, so I went to see if he walked home, you know, checking places along the path that he usually walks to get there..." Jennifer made a noise of panic before she continued, her voice shaking more and more. "He wasn't anywhere. He wasn't home either. I've been looking and looking, and so has everyone else, as I'm sure you've heard, but... We haven't found him."

Even with their slight disdain and leftover fear of the woman from their high school days, Will, Dustin, and Mike felt horrible for her. She sounded close to tears. And Hawkins was kind of an easy place for a little boy to get lost in, or... Well, they didn't want to think about any other possibilities.

"We're really sorry, Mrs. Hodges... We'll all keep a lookout for him, right guys?" Will turned to his co-host and producer.

Mike nodded solemnly. Dustin nodded, and leaned to the microphone. "Yeah! You know, maybe he just got lost out there." He said. When he realized that this wasn't that comforting, he rushed to add, *"But Hawkins' Police will definitely find him. Just, uh... Hang in there."*

Jennifer paused again, before quietly but firmly speaking. "I appreciate it. I really do. But, I still want to talk about that and your story."

Will blinked. "Right! Please, um... Tell us."

"Will," Jennifer began, and Will blanched again, despite himself. "You said the voice on the phone was a child's?"

Will nodded. "Yes, it was, but..."

Jennifer beat him to the punch before he could go on. Her voice was tingling with more emotion than even before. "Josh calls his father *Papa*."

At this, Will's face somehow managed to get even paler. He glanced to Dustin, who's mouth was half open as he processed this big piece of information. Will cleared his throat quietly. "I mean... At the time, I thought the voice was a girl's, but..." He paused, wide-eyed, as he

thought back to his experience. Well, he could have been wrong. How old was Jennifer's son now? Six? Seven? The boy's age was something he preferred not to think about too much, because then he was only reminded of junior year. Anyway, it could have been a young boy, after all. A kid that young could have a voice that is hard to differentiate. "It... Could have been."

The realization of this seemed to set in with all of the boys, and Will felt a horrible wrench in his stomach when he remembered that the last he heard of the voice was possibly-Josh *screaming*.

"I just..." Jennifer began with a tearful, warbling voice, "What if he's been taken? A-And... He was calling for help?"

The two hosts were speechless. A chill ran down their spines. Will felt guilt plague his senses.

"Now, Mrs. Hodges..." Dustin said in a quiet, reassuring tone - the same tone he often used to soothe his mother - "Will did say that he thought he heard a girl's voice. He's usually spot-on with voices, you know! So..." He paused, feeling guilty, worried, and uncomfortable. "Maybe it was a coincidence. I mean, Will said that the phone was going just fine during power troubles. To me, that really sounds more like a haunting than a... uh, than Josh calling."

"They *will* find him, Jenn." Will promised, but he was looking terrified. What if it really was Josh? He should have kept him on the phone. He should have asked who he was, and where he was, and -

"I really hope so..." Jennifer sniffed, not sounding any more reassured. But nobody really was assured about this. "I'm so scared for him, I don't know what to do! Every second he's gone, I just feel like *anything* could be happening, and I'm just *sitting* here as it's happening. He's everything to me. I don't have anyone else..."

At this, Dustin and Will shifted in their seats guiltily.

"I'm sorry..." She breathed after a small sob, "I just... Don't have anyone else to talk to. It's so quiet at home, and... Like you said, Will, the lights are doing all these things, and-" She stopped there, suddenly, to just sob. And then she didn't continue. She didn't need

to. She was alone, and she was scared.

"...Will you hold on for a minute, Jenn?" Will asked gently. They heard an ever-so-slight "Mm-hm", and Will looked to Dustin, jerking his head in Mike's direction. Dustin nodded.

The two hosts wheeled their chairs over to Mike, where a small meeting began.

"This is awful. Guys, what if it really *was* her son who called?" Will asked, wide-eyed.

"But you said it yourself, the phone was still going even after the power went out." Dustin replied, mostly to convince himself, even though he knew that was a weak argument.

"Well, that's the thing," Mike said grimly, raking his fingers through his hair, "The light bulbs were blown out, not the circuitry itself. As long as there wasn't a break in the circuit, the phone lines would still be fine."

"Regardless... She said she doesn't have anyone else to talk to, and... Well, now we might be involved, whether we like it or not. I think I'm going to tell her she can call us again." Will said, looking to his friends and silently asking for their agreement. They had definitely been hurt by her too, so he wasn't about to go head first without checking with them just because he had been involved with Jennifer on a deeper level than them. She had been their friend too.

"Are you sure?" Mike asked hesitantly, looking concerned for his best friend. He studied Will, as though searching for any sign of the old hurt from high school, just in case.

"Her son is missing." Will said with a small sigh, "I think we can make a truce for this. She needs support."

Mike nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Okay."

Dustin hesitated, but all his defensive anger had fizzled away with the sad story Jennifer Hodges had presented. "Truce." He agreed.

Dustin and Will rolled back to their respective microphones and fitted

their headphones back on. It was quiet. Will hesitantly spoke first. "Jenn - Er, Mrs. Hodges? We're back."

There was a pause before her voice came back, and the two hosts were relieved to hear it. "You can call me Jenn, it's fine."

The two exchanged looks, before both starting to speak at the same time, Dustin beginning with, "You know, we're always open to callers", and Will beginning with, "If you ever need someone to talk to..."

They stopped. Dustin let Will go. Will cleared his throat. "Jenn, we're here to talk if you need it. We don't always get a lot of callers, anyway. And... If there's anything you need, just let us know." He said.

Another pause. Her voice cracked. "Really?" She asked, disbelieving.

Will felt the support and agreement from his friends silently reassuring him, giving him the confidence to reply, "Yeah. All of us down here at 11.7 'The Hawk' are here to support you and Josh."

She breathed a half-sigh, half-sob. "...You don't know how much that means to me."

As hesitant as the three felt, their decided gesture and her appreciation made them feel pretty good at that moment. They couldn't help but think of Will's mother, Joyce Byers, whom they had only grown to appreciate more and more as the years went by. She was a single mother too for a while, but she always gave every part of herself to her son and his friends, even when she was overwhelmed with everything else. To this day, she was the one each of them went to for advice, or just to have a sympathetic ear.

"I've been listening to your show for a while now, actually... I think it's really good. I mean it." She admitted.

All three of the men flushed at her confession and praise. She had been listening? To *them*? The Dustin, Will, and Mike show? There was a long pause as Dustin and Will exchanged a look. Then Dustin's initially shocked expression turned suspicious, despite himself.

"Well, that certainly means a lot to hear that from you." He replied politely, and trying not to sound too defensive. But, even though his good nature hated him for it, he couldn't help but feel like her sudden kindness had strings attached. But... perhaps she was making an exception to talk to them due to circumstances, which made sense. But even with that, he couldn't help but feel like she was going to them because she knew how good-natured all of them - but particularly his co-host - was.

Dustin cast a side-glance to Will, and he could see the evidence for that good nature plain as day. He was looking beyond his microphone, eyes glazed over and clearly mulling over worried thoughts. Dustin was just trying to be careful, that's all. He wasn't about to see any of them tied up with someone as fickle as Jennifer Hayes - *Hodges* - again.

"It really does. Thanks for listening." Will agreed, looking very conflicted.

Another long pause.

"I guess I'll go. Thank you, both of you. Mike, too." Jennifer sighed.

Mike frowned, then shared a look with Dustin. He was slightly suspicious too. Why was she calling out the tech guy too? She could just be trying to be nice, but... It was a little weird. But then, Mike quickly shook his head, clearly pushing aside personal suspicions away in the light of the fact that kept recurring in everyone's minds any time they felt some doubt: her son was missing.

"Okay, Jenn. Thanks for calling." Will said, his very active, conflicted mind sounding quite clear through his voice.

"Bye." She said.

She hung up. There was a pause as the two hosts processed the sheer amount of new information they had received. Then Dustin piped up: "Well, we'll be right back after a commercial! Keep those calls coming, we'll get to them right after the break."

Dustin turned on a commercial, and then wheeled his chair around so

that he was facing both his friends. He breathed an enormous sigh, his eyes wide.

"...Wow." Mike commented, removing his headphones, but still keeping them close enough to his ear so he knew when the commercials had ended.

"Yeah." Dustin agreed. Then he dove straight into voicing his worries. "Do you think we can trust her?" - when he saw Will's confused expression, he quickly added to clarify: "I mean, what if she's just getting our sympathy because she's desperate."

Mike and Will frowned. Dustin cringed. There was no real way to word it without sounding terrible, given the circumstances.

"Well, to some degree, she already confirmed that." Mike thought out loud, "But, I mean..."

"Her son is missing." Will finished, rather defensively. Which, once again, given the circumstances, made sense.

"You know what? Forget it." Dustin caved, holding his hands up. He sighed. "You're right. Just... I think we should be careful, you know?"

The statement in and of itself was pretty vague, but his friends knew what he meant. They all were telling themselves the same thing already: be kind, but don't get invested... Again. It was something they were all thinking the moment she had said she was listening to their show on a regular basis.

"Yeah." Mike agreed, glancing carefully to Will.

Will nodded, collecting himself quickly. "Yeah. Definitely."

The commercial break ended, and they jumped to answer the one other caller they had about six minutes later. They were hoping to distract themselves with potential discussions of the paranormal and get their excitement up. It was too bad that it was only the stoner who lived in the apartment across from them, Jeff Durkley, telling them about how a ghost was making his washing machine vibrate.

Their show ended late into the night as always, but somehow, they

felt more tired than usual. Dustin drove them back home, since they had only taken one car to the station, and as they quietly collapsed in their apartment's living room, they mulled over the information they had been given from the phone call from Jennifer Hodges, and how it potentially pertained to the voice Will had heard.

Dustin stared up at the ceiling from his spot as he splayed out on the couch. Then he spoke up. "Wait until Lucas hears about this." He commented. He couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm pretty sure he wouldn't care," Will replied thoughtfully. But... there again, he had been *pretty* angry about the events of Junior Year. "But... Maybe he will. I don't know."

There was a long pause.

"So... What do you think happened with her and Kevin Hodges?" Dustin asked quietly.

There was a loud groan from both Will and Mike. "I don't even want to know." Mike mumbled, rubbing both sides of the bridge of his nose.

They had definitely decided that, while they would look into the possibility that Josh had in fact been the one to call them, they would address it tomorrow. With rest, they would certainly be ready to investigate and help out in the search for the boy, and possibly figure out the issue with the lights around town, but at that moment... Well, for once, they were hoping there wasn't a conspiracy going on.

Only this time, everything was going to be blown wide open.

Far across town, outside the base surrounding Hawkins National Laboratory, a tiny pale figure crawled out of a pipe and emerged into the woods. The sound of sirens blaring and soldiers running to fend off impending dangers was left far behind as the young child ran into the mystery of the outside world, being swallowed up amongst the darkness of the trees, and away from everything she had ever known.